

11 May 1973

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Role in Cambodia

Hanoi's policies toward Cambodia have been closely related to its requirements for the war in South Vietnam. Indeed, since at least the early 1960's, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops have made extensive use of Cambodian territory to support Hanoi's military operations in South Vietnam. This situation remains in effect today. Vietnamese Communist combat forces still make use of sanctuaries and base areas inside Cambodia for resting and re-fitting following forays across the border into South Vietnam. The bulk of these combat forces, which are now estimated to total about 5,000 troops, are located along the border with South Vietnam's Military Region IV and are deployed against that area.

The North Vietnamese are also maintaining their vast logistic network in Cambodia chiefly to support Communist forces in South Vietnam. This logistic activity is centered in northeast Cambodia, an area that was under de facto Communist control even before Sihanouk's ouster in 1970, and in the areas bordering South Vietnam. It involves an estimated 28,400 Vietnamese Communist administrative services personnel. The extent of this manpower commitment testifies to the continuing importance that Hanoi attaches to having a free military hand in Cambodia, particularly in the area east of the Mekong River.

North Vietnam's political interest in Cambodia--as in Laos--is ultimately aimed at bringing Phnom Penh into its sphere of influence. Hanoi's efforts to establish its sway over Cambodia date back to the mid-1940's, when Communist Viet Minh elements

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from South Vietnam sought unsuccessfully to gain control over the Cambodian independence movement. The subsequent ascendancy of Prince Sihanouk to power in the early 1950's caused the North Vietnamese to damp down their short-term political designs on Cambodia. Mindful of Sihanouk's internal power and popularity, the North Vietnamese concentrated on enlisting Sihanouk's support for the attainment of their objectives in South Vietnam. This undertaking reached its apex in the mid-1960's, when Sihanouk agreed to and abetted the movement of substantial quantities of arms and ammunition through the port of Sihanoukville across Cambodia to Vietnamese Communist forces in South Vietnam.

Despite their ostensibly good relations with Sihanouk, however, the North Vietnamese had very carefully provided themselves with an "insurance policy" against the day when he might no longer be so cooperative or in a position of power. As early as 1954, Vietnamese Communist elements in Cambodia began recruiting groups of Cambodians to undergo extended military training and political indoctrination in North Vietnam. An estimated 8,000 Cambodians entered this pipeline between 1954 and Sihanouk's ouster in 1970. Some of them had begun to return to Cambodia several years before the Prince's deposition, presumably to work with antigovernment elements in northeastern Cambodia and in other sections of the country. The flow of returnees increased significantly once Cambodia became directly involved in the war. The returnees make up the bulk of the Khmer Communist Party, which apparently was formed in Hanoi in 1961. Party leadership in Cambodia is in the hands of three of Sihanouk's "ministers," who were surfaced by the North Vietnamese as the intended chiefs of the Cambodian "resistance" in the opening days of the war.

Hanoi's Support to the Khmer Communists

If it were not for Hanoi's support, the Khmer Communists would not exist as a viable military or political force. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops, assisted by Cambodian returnees from North Vietnam, have recruited, organized, and trained most of the Khmer Communist military units that

exist today. With Peking's aid, Hanoi has also supplied these units with essential military equipment to include virtually all of their weapons and ammunition.

This building and equipping process went on steadily during the first two years of the war. During that period, Hanoi's troops also were handling almost all of the fighting on the enemy side in Cambodia. Indeed, it was the numerous defeats that the North Vietnamese inflicted on the Cambodian Army between April of 1970 and the early summer of 1972 that are largely responsible for its present low state of morale and effectiveness.

With the onset of Hanoi's offensive in South Vietnam in April of 1972, the combat burden was increasingly shifted to the Khmer Communists' shoulders. They have since given an increasingly impressive account of themselves on the battlefield, thanks again in part to the demoralized state of Phnom Penh's forces. Although the Khmer Communists can no longer count on massive North Vietnamese ground support, they do need and receive other important forms of military assistance from their Vietnamese mentors. For example, Vietnamese Communist advisors still give tactical direction to some Khmer Communists units--and probably are also primarily responsible for shaping the Khmer Communists' overall military strategy. North Vietnamese sappers are available to carry out hit-and-run raids in or near Phnom Penh, and to conduct acts of sabotage and terrorism in the capital. North Vietnamese artillerymen provide some fire support for Khmer Communist troops operating against major population centers and against ship convoys on the Mekong River.

More importantly, however, the Vietnamese Communists still serve as the Khmer Communists' logistical lifeline. Since last fall, when a cease-fire in South Vietnam appeared imminent, the North Vietnamese established in Cambodia a series of new border bases with large stockpiles opposite Military Regions III and IV to which the Khmer Communists have access. Besides being able to draw on these stockpiles, the Khmer Communists also obtain

supplies from major Vietnamese depots in Kratie and Kompong Cham Provinces and in several locales west of the Mekong. Most of these supplies consist of arms and ammunition since the Khmer Communists are virtually self-sufficient in obtaining non-military supplies.

The Khmer Communists also owe a sizable political debt to Hanoi. In addition to setting up the Khmer Communist Party and assembling and indoctrinating its leaders, the Vietnamese Communists laid the groundwork for the Khmer Communist infrastructure in the Cambodian countryside. In its early stages, the brunt of this effort was borne by experienced Viet Cong cadre from South Vietnam. They used their own blueprints to construct the Khmer Communists' administrative structure, which now is organized from the regional down to the hamlet level. Over the past year Khmer Communist cadre trained in North Vietnam have begun to assume control over more important positions in the infrastructure.

Hanoi's Current Degree of Control

Communist propaganda notwithstanding, the Khmer Communists cannot be described as an "independent" and "autonomous" movement. It is true that the Khmer Communists are handling most of the fighting. It is also true that they have assumed more responsibility for the local management of their affairs. But they undoubtedly would not have been able to do either, without approval from Hanoi. It is in the political interests of both the Vietnamese and Khmer Communists to portray the Cambodian conflict as a "civil war." And now that Khmer Communist troops have proved that they are a match for the government's soldiers (at least when the latter are demoralized by, and under, inept leadership), there is no reason for the North Vietnamese to waste their own combat manpower in Cambodia. As for the direction of the infrastructure, the Vietnamese recognize that the sooner they remove themselves the easier it will be for the Khmer Communists to gain wider political acceptance among the Cambodian masses.

The important question, however, is just how much control Hanoi can exercise over the Khmer

Communists. The answer must be that Hanoi's close relationship to the Khmer Communist leadership-- together with the logistic support it provides--allows the North Vietnamese to dominate the Khmer Communist movement. On the military side, it is likely that the Khmer Communists' refusal to agree to a cease-fire has been dictated by Hanoi's unwillingness to withdraw its own troops from Cambodia. On the other hand, if and when Hanoi is interested in a cease-fire and negotiations toward a peace agreement it can probably see to it that the Khmer Communists comply.

The Khmer Communists' political subservience to Hanoi was particularly evident in the circumstances surrounding Sihanouk's trip to Cambodia this past March. In February, there were good indications that the Khmer Communist leadership had little liking or use for their nominal "commander-in-chief." Once Hanoi decided that it was propitious to boost Sihanouk as the sole leader of unified in-country "resistance," however, the Khmer Communists went along with no discernible fuss.

Could the Khmer Communists Go It Alone?

It is doubtful that--at this stage of its development--the Khmer Communist movement has enough political vitality and maturity to act independently of Hanoi or buck big power pressure for a settlement. In the unlikely event that the Khmer Communists would disobey an order from Hanoi to enter into a cease-fire, they probably would be faced with the loss of all North Vietnamese military support. While this would be a serious blow, it would not result in a quick end to the war. Given the current estimated level of their stockpiles and assuming a continuation of their present rate of expenditures, the Khmer Communists most likely could go on fighting for at least a year after a cessation of supply shipments from North Vietnam over the Ho Chi Min trail in Laos. If they did not augment their forces and if the fighting were to revert to lower levels, the conflict could go on indefinitely. But without the North Vietnamese behind them, the Khmer Communists would prove a much more manageable problem for Phnom Penh. Though a prolonged military stalemate probably would be the result, the Khmer Communists--by themselves--probably could not topple the government in Phnom Penh.

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